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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 001288

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: FLN LEADER SEES MORE REFORM, HOPE FOR CLOSER U.S.
TIES

REF: A. ALGIERS 1280

[B](#). ALGIERS 1194

[C](#). ALGIERS 1208

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: National Liberation Front (FLN) Secretary-General (and former Prime Minister) Abdelaziz Belkhadem, now the leader of the alliance pushing for a third term for President Bouteflika, believes there is a hope for closer economic and political relations with the U.S. He told the Ambassador on December 7 that he had no objection to international observers for the April 2009 presidential elections, and provided his optic on the November 12 constitutional revision. Belkhadem previewed a possible next phase of constitutional change aimed at strengthening the legislative branch of government. He also asserted that despite his personal dislike of quotas, government intervention to require minimum percentages of women candidates for political office was necessary to overcome tradition. END SUMMARY.

ELECTION OBSERVERS

[2](#). (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by P/E chief, met for an hour on December 7 with Belkhadem at the presidency. When the Ambassador asked the FLN leader about his recent statements on election monitors for the April 2009 elections, Belkhadem stated clearly that he had "no objection," although he acknowledged that any observer presence would have to be coordinated with respect for Algeria's sensitivities about its sovereignty. The subject was also raised by Representative Alcee Hastings (D-FL) during his December 2 visit to Algiers, and met with cautiously supportive responses from his Algerian interlocutors (ref A). The Ambassador informed Belkhadem that the FLN chief was the first political party leader he had met, although he intended to meet as soon as he could with leaders of all the legal parties in order to better understand the Algerian political scene, whether on constitutional changes, or coming elections or other matters. The Ambassador added that, as a former journalist, he had been impressed by the vigor and extensive coverage of contending viewpoints in the Algerian press.

BELKHADEM: THIRD-TERM CRITICS MISSING THE POINT

[3](#). (C) Belkhadem provided some personal insights into the November 12 constitutional revision (refs B and C) as part of

what he perceived to be a gradual Algerian political evolution over time. Noting that Algeria needed a strong presidential system, Belkhadem said the constitutional change clarifying executive branch powers was far more important than the abolition of term limits. Unfortunately, he added, journalists and other critics had focused not on this, but mainly on the issue of a third term for Bouteflika. Belkhadem then gave a historical account of Algeria's political evolution, which he claimed was driving toward greater separation of powers and a more empowered and independent legislature. He pointed out that prior to 1976, Algeria was governed by a Revolutionary Council, which was the locus of all government authority. The president was the leader of the Council. With the national compact of 1976, the Council began to divide into the three branches of government, the political part of which was the FLN, the ruling (and only) political party.

14. (C) Belkhadem's political history explanation was peppered with anecdotes of his own participation at each stage. He was elected to parliament in 1977, and was part of the political landscape that followed the initial modification of government authority in 1976. Describing the subsequent 1989 change that gave birth to the multiparty system, Belkhadem asserted that the separation of powers between the three branches of government was becoming more distinct under then-President Chadli Bendjedid. The next constitutional revision came in 1996 under President Liamine Zeroual and reflected a time of crisis, Belkhadem explained. After Chadli, "we lived a transitional phase," and needed to pass a law forbidding political parties from exacerbating the fitna

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(profound conflict) by exploiting Arab, Amazight (Berber) or Islamic identity for political ends. Belkhadem claimed he gave Zeroual a dissenting opinion of the 1996 revision, saying Algeria "would not move towards the future" since it had not clarified its hybrid presidential-parliamentary system. Belkhadem did concede that the 1996 constitution was the first time Algeria had a bicameral legislature, which represented another small step forward in his view.

MORE REFORMS ON THE WAY?

15. (C) "We want a presidential system," Belkhadem told the Ambassador, explaining that the coordination of executive powers had become confusing, with the head of state sometimes having one agenda and the head of government (the prime minister) having another. "I tried this myself," he said, as prime minister from 2006 until June 2008. Interestingly, Belkhadem went on to say that further constitutional reform was needed to make the legislature more representative and effective. He made a special point of saying the parliament should take a stronger role in drafting and amending legislation. "We wanted to go deeper," he said, but "did not have enough time" to hold the popular referendum that a more complex constitutional revision would have required. (Note: The Constitutional Council, not Belkhadem, determines whether proposed amendments are approved by referendum or by special joint session of parliament. End note.) Belkhadem said that the FLN particularly wanted to amend the requirement for a three-quarters majority in favor of a simple majority for the passage of legislation. He told the Ambassador that strengthening the role of the legislature should be the next step in Algeria's political evolution, and he expected discussion of the issue to start after the April presidential elections.

16. (C) On the political role of women, Belkhadem explained how the constitutional amendment strengthening female representation in politics would be implemented. Belkhadem said that Algerian society remains "burdened by tradition" and it was difficult to change attitudes of both men and women in order to encourage adequate numbers of women to enter the political arena. Although he was personally

opposed to quotas, Belkhadem said he was convinced that the government had to intervene with quotas "for a transitional period" rather than simply wait for mentalities to change. Belkhadem did not know what the outcome would be - e.g., whether 15 or 20 or 25 percent or some other number would be decided - but he clearly felt it would not be unreasonable to require lists of local candidates to include at least 20 percent women.

ON BILATERAL RELATIONS

17. (C) Belkhadem said he believed there was a "natural basis" for greater economic and political relations with the U.S. He said he was still pained by the U.S. decision not to participate in the 2007 International Trade Fair, an important symbol for the Algerian government, even though he acknowledged that the U.S. had returned to participate in the 2008 edition. In response to Belkhadem's criticism of Algeria's portrayal in annual U.S. reports on human rights and religious freedom, among others, the Ambassador pointed out that we would welcome any additional information the Algerian government could provide, but that we would not see eye-to-eye on all issues all the time, and disagreements were inevitable. What was important was to maintain our dialogue on such issues, whatever the disagreements. Belkhadem agreed, and said he looked forward to discussing a range of regional matters, possibly in a second meeting. He noted that the two countries share the habit of speaking directly, and promised that the Ambassador would not hear one thing from him in private and another in public. Belkhadem welcomed the Ambassador's interest in talking to a wide variety of people, noting that it was better to do this than listen only to chattering in elite political salons. The Ambassador said Algeria plays a critical role in regional stability, security and especially the fight against terrorism. Belkhadem agreed that, although Algeria was sensitive to any foreign military presence on its soil, joint

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training exercises, dialogue and other security cooperation were important.

COMMENT

18. (C) Belkhadem is the leader of the more conservative and Islamist-leaning wing within the FLN, and has never been known as a progressive thinker receptive to U.S. initiatives. He began the one-hour meeting, which was conducted in Arabic, with a polite but critical 15-minute monologue on U.S. policy. He professed to be mystified that bilateral relations were not closer, given the importance of our energy, trade and security relationships. Nevertheless, the former PM's tone was surprisingly receptive throughout the session. It is worth noting that he himself took the initiative to set up the meeting, insisting -- during a chance encounter with the Ambassador at a reception by the government's human rights organization - on setting a time for a meeting on the spot, and this in a country where it can take weeks to get a ministerial appointment. When it became clear during the meeting that neither youth issues raised by the Ambassador nor regional topics raised by Belkhadem could be fully covered in the one-hour session, Belkhadem immediately offered a follow-up meeting at FLN offices, including with the party's youth wing. On a political level, the vision he offered of boosting the representation of women in politics was encouraging, if somewhat surprising from the former prime minister associated with introduction of a family code reviled by many women. Most notably, however, this was the first we have heard of any serious initiative to strengthen the powers of the legislative branch and make it more effective. If that were to pan out, it could be a sign that the leadership is looking for ways to make the political system more responsive to societal pressure for change, and in particular for ways to accommodate the vast numbers of

young people in Algeria who feel so profoundly alienated.
PEARCE